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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 JEDDAH 000465

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PPD, SE/S-O, CA/OCS/ACS-NEA

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SUBJECT: THE GREAT JEDDAH FLOOD: CONTINUING CONCERN ABOUT
DAMS, DRAINAGE, LEADERSHIP (CORRECTED COPY)

REF: A. JEDDAH456

[B. JEDDAH457](#)

[C. JEDDAH460](#)

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Public and media condemnation of the Saudi local government continues two weeks after flash floods inundated Jeddah. Concern has shifted from the plight of the flood victims to broader issues such as the disaster investigation and a Shoura Council meeting yesterday which urged government departments to prepare strategic plans for dealing with floods and other natural disasters. Public worry about the condition of the "Misk Lake" dam, briefly at the point of panic a week ago, has eased somewhat. However, awareness is growing of the long-term hazard, especially in the event of renewed rain, and the Jeddah City Council is meeting on Wednesday to consider next steps, including a possible request for foreign/US expert assistance. Critics have condemned official mismanagement and corruption while calling for independent oversight of government actions and seeking foreign expertise in urban planning, some alleging the involvement of royals in land sales in the flood zone. Opinion is divided over whether the current activism and open criticism of the authorities will result in permanent positive changes, with some predicting the official investigative commission established by the King will stop short of publicly identifying and punishing those who mismanaged Jeddah's infrastructure. END SUMMARY.

Some streets still flooded, more rain possible

[1](#)2. (C) Almost two weeks after flash floods struck Jeddah in what is being billed as "Jeddah's Katrina" (reftels), the hardest hit district, Quwaizah, in southeastern Jeddah, continued to have a foot of water on its major streets when ConGen officers visited it on Friday and Saturday. Relatively limited government assistance, such as food distribution and the presence of Civil Defense forces, was apparent. According to press accounts, the floods claimed 116 lives (including a 3-year-old US citizen), damaged more than 7,000 properties, destroyed upwards of 7,000 vehicles,

and displaced at least 22,000 residents. King Abdulaziz University, situated opposite Quwaizah, is reported to have suffered losses estimated at SAR 1.6 billion (\$427 million) due to the flood. With more rain possible and fears that a reservoir of raw sewage, located east of Jeddah at an elevation of 125 meters above sea level, will overflow into the city, the Consulate General issued a warden message advising US citizens in Jeddah to closely monitor weather forecasts and exercise extreme caution in traveling by road in the event of further rain or flash flooding.

Misk Lake and the "preventive dam" -- the danger

¶3. (SBU) A member of the Jeddah City Council (and until two weeks ago its chairman), Dr. Tarek Fadaaq, a city planner, briefed CG Saturday on the city's concerns regarding the so-called "preventive dam" (reservoir), located immediately southwest of the Misk Lake sewage dam. The preventive dam contains "cleaner water" while Misk Lake contains raw sewage. Saudi engineers are working to fix the problem including diverting the water to a third dam or wadi (dry river bed).

¶4. (SBU) The danger is that in the event of moderate to heavy rainfall there may be more flash flooding in Jeddah, primarily affecting the areas east of the main north-south Al-Haramain Ring Road Expressway, which were damaged in the November 25 flood, including Quwaizah, Kilo 11 and Kilo 14, but also potentially affecting some of the more affluent west Jeddah areas. It is thought that the Expressway itself would act as a partial flood barrier, keeping most of the damage in the eastern part of the city. The Misk Lake (earthen) dam is currently at the 10.2 meter level with 13 meters being the overflow/break point; normal level is 9 meters. The second,

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"preventive dam" is at 14 meters currently, the capacity being 15 meters. In addition, there are 13 wadis in Jeddah running east to west, which have the potential in the worst case scenario, to fill with water to accommodate heavy flooding. The area of Palestine Street, on which the Consulate, a hospital, several hotels, and many businesses are situated, sits on one of these wadis.

Possible request for US assistance

¶5. (SBU) It is possible that as a result of a meeting of the Jeddah City Council on Wednesday, the Saudis may request US technical/engineering assistance or consultation (as was done after the earthquakes near Madina last spring, when the SAG asked and paid for USGS consultation). With the cooperation of USMTM, the Mission is developing a picture of what resources could be brought to bear, but cannot act without a formal SAG request.

Intense public criticism -- use of social media

¶6. (C) Public and media criticism of the local government's failure to prevent and respond to the disaster remains intense. Al Watan Arabic daily reported that at a soccer match between Jeddah's two main teams on Saturday spectators at the stadium held up posters criticizing the government's handling of the floods. Police quickly took away the signs, as public protests are prohibited in Saudi Arabia. Columnist Hussein Shobokshi (strictly protect) characterized the intensely critical Saudi press coverage of the floods as "one of the media's occasional flashes of brilliance," similar to the coverage of the 2002 fire at a Mecca girls'

school in which students burned to death after religious police were alleged to have prevented them from fleeing the building without their abayas. Thankful the floods happened while the King, 2.5 million pilgrims, international media, and civil defense forces were near Jeddah for the Hajj, Shobokshi said that otherwise the problem would have been ignored. Official media remain constrained, however. Shobokshi told us on Monday that a local newspaper declined to publish his criticism of government handling of the disaster, as he had expected. Members of the public have bypassed censorship using social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and SMS, to document the destruction, organize private relief efforts, and harshly condemn those believed responsible for the largely preventable disaster. One blogger, citing government officials by name, wrote: "I spit on all thieves, corrupters and traitors who made life in Jeddah unbearable."

17. (C) The public have also criticized the religious police (Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice or mutawa), generally present in comfortable, air-conditioned shopping malls, for their absence from relief efforts. Young Saudi volunteers have flouted the prohibition on gender mixing and rejected requests to segregate by gender. One young female volunteer who appeared at the volunteer gathering point dressed for grubby work rather than in the usual mandatory abaya was told by a religious policeman to go home and come back properly covered; she refused, telling him "to get lost."

Pointing fingers and assessing blame

18. (C) Contacts and public reports attribute the flood disaster to a range of factors: (1) the Riyadh government's unwillingness to appropriate sufficient funds for Jeddah infrastructure projects (particularly for sewer and storm drainage systems that might have prevented flooding), (2) a culture of corruption that ensured only a fraction of appropriated funds were actually spent on stop-gap measures, (3) the government's profound lack of experience in urban planning and project management, and (4) shoddy work by contractors. Two individuals -- Fahad Al-Suliman (cousin of

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recently re-elected Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry board member Lama Suliman), former director of the water and sewage department, and his then-secretary, Motaz Raslan -- have been singled out for allegedly "stealing billions" of Saudi riyals intended for drainage projects. (Both are believed to be living abroad, having enriched themselves at public expense.) A source at the SAG's preferred construction company, the Saudi Bin Laden Group, denied any responsibility for the flooded underpasses or possible breaches to the containment area for untreated sewage, "Misk Lake" -- saying the company builds exactly what the government instructs it to build. Citizens are questioning why the Bin Laden Group has been selected to build another barrier around Misk Lake if its previous construction was inadequate.

Blaming the victims ...

19. (C) Some Jeddah Municipality officials initially implied that the flood victims were partially to blame for their predicament, suggesting they were squatters who had built homes illegally in a flood plain. Subsequent media accounts have rebutted the contention. Radio journalist Samar Fatany (strictly protect) and Shobokshi asserted that several prominent Saudi princes, including the son of a former Saudi king, had subdivided and sold to the public through agents

the low-lying land in Quwaizah that bore the brunt of the flood. They noted the presence of government institutions, including civil defense and schools, and government services such as water and electricity as further proof that structures were built legally -- or at least permitted due to royal influence.

"Saudization" and failure to seek foreign expertise

¶10. (C) Fatany partly blamed the government's failure to prevent or adequately respond to floods on Labor Minister Ghazi Algosaibi's push to employ Saudis, saying Saudi Arabia lacks expertise and desperately needs foreign talent in key fields such as urban planning and public administration. Her husband -- Arab News editor Khaled AlMaena -- editorialized today that having failed their own people, it is time for Saudis to turn to experts in other countries. Shobokshi agreed, saying that for years he has recommended the Saudi government consult the Netherlands (experts in holding back the seas), Britain (for sewer drainage systems), and Singapore (for waste water treatment). The Saudi Government has not (yet) requested official US assistance.

A watershed moment for civil society ...

¶11. (C) Commentators disagreed whether the flood and its aftermath would lead to permanent positive changes in Saudi government and society. Shobokshi described the disaster as a wake-up call for Saudis, who saw sections of this wealthy, cosmopolitan city resembling conditions in Bangladesh or Nigeria. As a result, he predicted the Kingdom will reduce its level of foreign assistance, saying "Saudis will object to buying new textbooks for Lebanese children" when there are un-met needs at home. He doubted whether the flood would lead to permanent reforms, since internet activists would eventually exhaust themselves and fall silent. Fatany was optimistic, praising young Saudis' activism in response to the flooding, and forecasting "they would sweep away the corrupt older generation." They and others agreed on the need for independent oversight of government actions, with Fatany calling for the government to authorize civil society groups (currently banned). Some local commentators expressed skepticism that the investigative committee formed by the King -- consisting solely of government officials -- would punish the corrupt individuals responsible for mismanaging Jeddah, although virtually everyone believes Jeddah Mayor Adel Fageeh will be removed from office. A few defend the mayor, in office five years and the force behind the Jeddah

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20-year "Strategic Plan" (unveiled barely a week before the flood), and see him as the unfortunate sacrificial goat.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Twelve days after Jeddah's Great Wednesday Flood, the disaster remains the main topic of conversation in this city. The media have been granted relatively free license to castigate local government officials and contractors deemed responsible for the incident and to keep the catastrophe in the public mind. In the meantime there has been a surge of civil society activity in Jeddah, volunteers coming forth to help flood victims in the face of municipal inefficiency and incompetence. Among these, the American International School of Jeddah and the American Business Group of Jeddah (ABJ) are collecting donations for victims, to be distributed through licensed local organizations such as the Al Bir Society and the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI). Post will continue to monitor and report.

END COMMENT.

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